

Beyond a discourse of deficit: The meaning of silence in the international classroom

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English language proficiency and entry standards have dominated discussion of why many international students from Asia appear to be reluctant contributors in Australian university classrooms, a reticence that is usually understood to result from difficulty in forming and expressing their ideas in English. This paper draws on a qualitative investigation into the perspectives of ten Vietnamese postgraduate coursework students. The findings suggest that, while language factors are important, an orientation to Vietnamese communicative cultures favouring discretion over conjecture for novices plays a significant role. Differences between the cultures of learning in Vietnam and Australia and the philosophies that underpin them are also crucial. We argue that measures to counteract apparent passivity in class should therefore be tackled at the level of teaching philosophy and involve explicit discussion of the patterns of interaction that are valued in the classroom and why. The implications for both staff and student training are discussed.

[Keywords: international students, Vietnamese cultures of learning, reluctance to speak, patterns of interaction]

Recent events notwithstanding, international education is on the increase, and still vital to Australia's economy, second only to mining in terms of international revenue. Our annual export income from education services increased steadily by 10.2 percent in 2009-10 compared to 2008-09, reinforcing its position as the Australia's leading services export industry. After China, India, Korea and Malaysia, Vietnam is the fifth largest market for education in Australia, and education services exports to Vietnam contributed approximately \$400 million in 2007-08, \$600 million in 2008-09 and \$800 million in 2009-10 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2011). This influx has stretched and challenged universities to cater for students that differ from local

students in many respects, and one of the foremost issues for staff and students alike has been a perceived difficulty regarding communication in classrooms (Mack, 2004; The University of Melbourne, 2004).

This difficulty is usually understood as relating chiefly to issues of language proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening skills, and these certainly play an important role (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). However, a range of other issues comes into play, including sociocultural expectations of the appropriate classroom behaviour. The study reported here explores, from the perspective of international students themselves, the roots and implications of their silence in the classroom.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND CULTURE

Despite the considerable variation found among students from Asia, their apparent reluctance to speak up in class has attracted attention. In an early study, Sato (1990) showed that, despite accounting for roughly two thirds of her university class, the Asian students took just over one third of the turns to speak, and they volunteered their contributions far less often than did their non-Asian classmates. They also gave more signals to teachers before taking their turns, that is, they prepared her for the fact that they wanted to speak. Used to Australian students who self-select to speak and respond actively to open questions, lecturers in Australia are likely to interpret reticence to engage as a lack of understanding or competence, or even as a silent comment on the quality of their class. Many feel under-prepared to cope (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997; Maxwell, Adam, Pooran, & Scott, 2000; The University of Melbourne, 2004).

This apparent reluctance to speak by some international students is usually attributed to a lack of competence in English, particularly in speaking and listening in Australia and other popular destinations for international education (Marginson et al., 2010). Media reports also frequently focus on language proficiency as a significant issue among international students leading to charges of ‘soft-marking’ (Devos, 2003; Trounson, 2011). Cognitive factors related to proficiency have also been implicated, including difficulties in word-searching and the formation of ideas and psychological factors, such as ‘second language anxiety’ (Nakane, 2006). These include apprehension, embarrassment, strain in English communication, fear of making a linguistic mistake or the feeling of being in the minority and isolated in an English-speaking environment (Jones, 1995).

However, cultural issues have also received some attention. Cultural values, relating to deference, group responsibility and face vary across cultures, may also impact how students interact in class. For example, research has suggested that students from Asia may be more conscious of status differences between themselves and the teacher and, thus, feel more comfortable listening to the teacher rather than discussing issues in class (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Nakane, 2002, 2005). Differences in attitudes towards classmates may also impact patterns of interaction, and here a stronger collective orientation in Asian cultures is frequently

invoked as underwriting a reluctance to 'stand out' from peers by expressing personal ideas or wasting their time by asking questions in class. Similarly, a strong preference for group harmony has been argued to discourage vigorous argumentation (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Kato, 2001; Littlewood, 1999). Face issues also come into play if contributions are perceived by lecturers and peers to be wrong or inappropriate, and while this is true for all students, the degree of face threat posed by imperfect contributions varies across cultures. 'Making mistakes', 'being ridiculous' (Littlewood, 1999), 'being criticised' or 'receiving negative feedback' (Nakane, 2002) are concerns that have been voiced by Asian students.

Also critical here is the notion of *cultures of learning*, that is, the expectations that both students and teachers bring with them to the classroom concerning expected and appropriate behaviours (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Kato, 2001; Yates, 2003). Because learning traditions vary across cultures, there may be mismatches in assumptions about valued and effective classroom behaviour (Mack, 2004; Maxwell et al., 2000; Ramburuth and McCormick, 2001). These may relate to expectations regarding the goals of education, teaching and learning styles and include assumptions about patterns of interaction appropriate in the classroom, that is, who has the right to speak, when and what should they be saying. Prior engagement with cultures of learning that favour patterns of interaction different from those valued in Australian classrooms can impact significantly on how appropriate students feel it is to speak out.

Students used to Asian cultures of learning may also not value talk in class in the same way as recent Anglo-western approaches have, that is, as an important part of the *process* of learning rather than simply as the *product* of that learning. Indeed, Nakane (2002) found that the Japanese students in her study did not place much importance on the oral mode of learning and, therefore, regarded some of the interaction in their Australian classrooms as irrelevant. A rare study of Vietnamese students in Western classrooms concludes that traditional cultures of learning and philosophies remain a powerful influence on their approach to learning and identifies three main reasons for their apparent passivity in class: the esteem given to education and teachers in Vietnamese culture; traditional Vietnamese teaching and learning methods; and the requirement for absolute obedience from Vietnamese children in both school and family settings (Nguyen, 1988). In more recent years, this one-way traditional teaching and learning style has been challenged by globalisation and Western emphases on communication. It is timely, therefore, to explore the perceptions of Vietnamese students themselves as they study in Australia and reflect on their behaviour and that of their peers in university postgraduate classes.

THE STUDY

Our aim in the study was to gain insight from the perspective of Vietnamese students themselves into this perceived lack of participation in Australian university classrooms. Ten participants from Vietnam, five males and five females, who were studying at an Australian University, were recruited for the study. All had bachelor degrees

from Vietnam and were being sponsored by either the Australian or the Vietnamese government to study for a Master of Education by coursework in Educational Leadership and Management (5), Science and technology Education (4) or Applied Linguistics (1). Nine were teachers in colleges or universities in Vietnam and one worked in the field of educational services in Hanoi. All, therefore, lived and worked in an urban setting. They ranged in age from 22 to 33 years old and had studied in Australia from between just under one year, to three and a half years. All had reached the minimum English language requirement for postgraduate study (an average of 6.5 IELTS with no band lower than 6, a TOEFL score of at least 600 or a high pass on the Direct Entry assessment tasks administered during their pre-enrolment study at the university Language Centre). They were all known to one of the researchers – the interviewer – as fellow students. A summary of participants is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of participants

Id	Gender	Year born	Course of study	Years study in Australia	English Entry score
F1	Female	1984	Educational Leadership	1	600 (TOEFL)
F2	Female	1976	Educational Leadership	3	Direct Entry
F3	Female	1981	Educational Leadership	0.5	6.5 (IELTS)
F4	Female	1977	Applied Linguistics	1.5	6.5 (IELTS)
F5	Female	1978	Educational Leadership	1.5	6.5 (IELTS)
M1	Male	1980	Science and Technology Ed.	3.5	Direct Entry
M2	Male	1981	Science and Technology Ed.	3	Direct Entry
M3	Male	1982	Science and Technology Ed.	2.5	Direct Entry
M4	Male	1980	Science and Technology Ed.	3	Direct Entry
M5	Male	1975	Educational Leadership	3.5	Direct Entry

Individual semi-structured interviews were selected as a methodology that would allow access to ‘the context of their behaviour’ and, thus, “the meaning of that behaviour” (Seidman, 1991, p.3). We focussed on participants’ experiences in classes held in the smaller Education units, rather than those of other disciplines (for example, Science) where opportunities for oral participation might have been limited by class size or the nature of the activity, and because staff in the Education Department had raised the apparent reluctance of a number Vietnamese students (though not necessarily of the participants) to participate in classroom discussions as an ongoing issue.

Each participant was invited personally to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted in Vietnamese at a place of their choosing on campus and lasted between one and one-and-a-half-hours. Interviews addressed the following topics:

- their perceptions of classroom interaction;
- any difficulties they experienced in interaction in the Australian classroom, their communicative style and behaviour in the classroom;

- their opinions on classrooms in Australia and in Vietnam;
- their opinions on the interactions of Western students and Asian, particularly Vietnamese, students;
- anything that might help them to participate more actively in class.

The interviews were transcribed, translated by one of the authors and organised into sections corresponding to the main questions/topics of the interviews. Major themes emerging from the data were identified and related to themes suggested in the literature. The most salient of these are discussed below.

THE PERCEPTIONS OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS

Views on oral participation in class

Although they explained their reasons in slightly different ways, all participants felt that students needed to take an active role in university classrooms and were aware of oral interaction as an expectation in their Australian university classes. In particular, one of the two participants with the longest time studying in Australia felt that students should contribute ideas in class irrespective of whether they were confident that they were right or wrong.

In an Australian learning environment, I think that all students should contribute their ideas in class. They should not afraid of being wrong. (M5)

All of the participants also felt that constructive argument between teachers and students was acceptable, but most noted that students should not forget the respect due to teachers. Five were explicit about the difference in learning culture from Vietnam and how their own view of appropriate and useful classroom participation had changed:

Before I used to think that if I argue with the teacher, this means that I would offend him and make him unhappy. Now I have changed my mind. Now I think that it is only through discussion and argument that problems can be solved and we both are satisfied. (F3)

While there is, of course, enormous variation in what happens in Australian university classrooms, such views of the usefulness and appropriate nature of discussion and even arguments with the teacher are closer to expectations underlying learning and teaching approaches in Australian classrooms than those of the educational cultures they are likely to have experienced in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2002; Quang and Vuong, 2002). Nor did the participants seem to regard self-selection to speak as an interruption or a waste of time as has been suggested in other studies (Nakane, 2005; Volet and Kee, 1993).

Most agreed that the valuing of the students' contributions that they had seen in their Australian classrooms was positive and this had become part of their own beliefs and way of thinking.

Vietnamese university classrooms are more in favour of theory. Teachers mainly give lectures, students have to listen to and try to memorize. In Australian

university classrooms, learners' role is considered more important. It means that students are encouraged to give their personal ideas and there is no imposition on that. Truly speaking, the atmosphere of Australian classrooms is more active and more effective, knowledge that students obtain in class through discussions is more practical and easier to absorb. (M1)

Rather than viewing teachers as the only and the most important source of knowledge or regarding themselves as passive recipients of knowledge, they liked to see themselves as engaged, independent participants in classes characterised by discussion and exploration of new ideas, and they valued the relative informality of their Australian classrooms.

These qualitative insights accord with the findings from Wong's (2004) quantitative study of Asian international students in an Australian University in that 70% of participants favoured the student-centred teaching and learning style they found in their classrooms. Similarly, Littlewood (2000, 2001) found no difference in the attitude of Asian and European students towards teachers' authority and learning styles. Like Western students, Asian students rejected teacher-centred, passive approaches to learning in favour of a more dynamic and independent role in class, suggesting that "the stereotype of Asian students as "obedient listeners" – whether or not it is a reflection of their actual behaviour in class – does not reflect the roles they would like to adopt in class" (Littlewood, 2000, p.33).

However, there does seem to be a gap between the role these students would like to adopt and their actual behaviours in classrooms.

Perceptions of Vietnamese students' reluctance to speak in class

Vietnamese cultural values. These positive views of oral participation notwithstanding, all of the participants admitted, either directly or indirectly, that they were not as active as Western students in their university classrooms, although they more often referred to the passivity of Vietnamese students in general rather than to their own. They described them as: 'passive', 'quiet', 'silent', 'timid', 'reserved', 'afraid to talk', 'not as active as local students', who 'contribute less than others in class', 'participate less than others', and 'have weak communicative skills'. One participant even felt that of all the students in the classrooms, Vietnamese students might be the most passive of all.

When asked why this was so, nine of the ten participants offered language proficiency as a major reason:

The biggest barrier to us is our ability in English. We understand issues, but we cannot express them fully. (M5)

The first reason is the language obstacle. The language barrier is very important because if we cannot find enough words to talk, we will not be confident to talk. (F2)

One participant explained how she felt when a compatriot with ‘bad’ English dared to make a lengthy contribution to class, concluding that it was inappropriate to oblige classmates to listen:

If your English is not good enough, and you keep talking much like that, you will make people... I don’t know what Australian peers thought. They may talk a lot but at least their English is good. (F2)

While the focus on grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative skills in English classes in Vietnam has been seen as contributing to a lack of confidence in using English communicatively (Nguyen, 2004), factors related to both Vietnamese cultural values in general and Vietnamese cultures of learning also emerged as closely linked to this lack of confidence. Eight of the ten participants were explicit about this influence. The females, in particular, traced it back to Vietnamese values, such as the expectation of obedience by juniors to seniors, the importance of modesty and reserve in speech, the need not to stand out from the crowd in formal situations and a preference for indirectness with those in authority.

I was taught not to be talkative. ‘It takes three years to learn to speak and a life to learn to listen’, so I do not talk much. It is hard to change this. (F2)

Another factor I think is related to our culture, our lifestyle. Vietnamese are not as open as people here. To our close friends we can talk freely, but to the whole class, we do not feel comfortable... People may also be afraid that when they stand out to speak, others will look at them. You know, in our culture, people often do not like to stand out of the crowd. (F1)

I see that we have many things different from Australian students. For example, they can ask things more freely and directly. We do not ask directly, we beat around the bush. They may ask questions that, as students, we see too straight or too direct to teachers. However, this may be due to their culture. (F4)

The importance in Vietnamese culture of respect for social status and seniors, obedience, indirectness and attention to face are well-documented (Nguyen, 2002; Quang and Vuong, 2002) and have been associated with a collectivist orientation (Littlewood, 1999, 2001). However, while children in Asian cultures may be taught to show reserve as a mark of respect (Park, 2000), in an Australian classroom a similar reserve may be seen as a lack of friendliness, ability or interpersonal skills (Giles, Coupland & Weimann, 1992; Nakane, 2007). Such cultural values evidently impact on classroom behaviours, including the type, amount and quality of interaction that students consider appropriate in the classroom setting (Littrell, 2005; Nakane, 2006).

Vietnamese learning traditions. All participants were keenly aware of differences in Vietnamese and Australian learning cultures and many saw a direct impact on patterns of classroom participation. Vietnamese cultures of learning were described as involving a ‘passive and teacher-centred teaching and learning style’, in which ‘knowledge is supposed to be given by teacher,’ and ‘students are expected to listen to teachers and not to talk to each other in class.’ They described the clear status differences between students and teachers so that ‘students who want to talk have to

raise their hands, be allowed by teachers to talk and have to stand up to talk'. Such social distance inhibited a free exchange of ideas.

Our Vietnamese students are more passive than Western students because from the early classes, we are used to only listening, taking notes and learning by heart what teacher has said. We are not trained to discuss or argue. Whereas here, from kindergarten they are taught to present to the class and to project their views. That's why they are much more active. (M4).

Despite the positive attitudes towards oral participation in class discussed earlier, participants expressed some reservations about how easy it would be to adjust:

This is what we have been used to from an early age, so it is very hard for us to change. If we want to change, we should have started in primary school. (F5)

Such comments illustrate the challenges faced by adult learners who have been educated in one culture of learning, and, therefore, socialized into particular understandings of goals and appropriate learning behaviours, but who then move on to study in another where expectations may be very different (Kato, 2001; Yates, 2003).

However, an important part of the influence of their previous learning experiences seems to be an emphasis on the quality of classroom contributions. Like the students in Tatar's (2005) study, they felt strongly that contributions from local and international students alike should be useful, relevant and to the point. Eight participants commented on this explicitly, and seven specifically cited their lack of knowledge as a reason for not contributing to discussions. As M1 and M3 noted, such considerations did not seem to be as important for local students. In other words, while local students were prepared to take risks (or take up time, depending on your perspective) to contribute, even if their contributions were not well-informed or apposite, the participants felt underqualified to do so.

Local students ask straight away when they have questions. To me, I only ask when I think that my question is very important. There were times I felt annoyed as some of their questions were not important or necessary and this could affect other students. (M3)

What we contribute has to follow questions and lecture content closely. If we do not, we will not answer the questions properly, and we will stray from the subject. Among people who like to talk and contribute ideas actively, there are the ones whose contributions are irrelevant and rambling. They waste class time and others' talking opportunities. (M1)

They thought that people should talk only when they have something valuable to contribute; when they felt that they did not, they would rather say nothing.

I only feel comfortable contributing ideas when I am equipped with sufficient knowledge and I am sure that what I say is right, or what I say can contribute something to class. (F1)

These findings align with the insights from early studies which have suggested that Asian background students may be more reluctant than their American or Australian

counterparts to contribute questions or what they consider to be partially formed comments, and, as a consequence, may tend to withdraw from classroom communication or express ideas only after careful consideration (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995; Liu, 2000; Volet and Kee, 1993). This sense that they should take great care of the quality of their contributions and the fear of losing face if they said something wrong seemed to be related to their experiences of learning cultures in Vietnam.

We are afraid that we may say something wrong. This feeling originates from Vietnam. In Vietnam, when students contribute ideas, if they are right, they will be accepted. If they are wrong, they are often ignored. (M5)

Such fears indicate that participants regarded speaking out in class as a means of displaying their learning and intelligence, that is, as a product of learning rather than as part of the process of learning so that they would rather not contribute at all than to be judged negatively. While this display-oriented view of classroom discussion is not confined to Vietnamese students, it is reminiscent of Confucian inspired attitudes to the manifestation of wisdom (Scollon, 1999) and may be encouraged by the very competitive, exam-oriented nature of Vietnam's educational environment (see, for example, My, 2007; Vietnamnet, 2005).

Related to this concern for the quality of contributions was a preference not to 'bother' the teacher publicly (see, for example, Flowerdew and Miller, 1995). Four of the participants reported preferring to solve problems themselves or seeking help from peers rather than asking teachers in class:

Since I do not want to bother teachers and waste other students' time, I often ask the classmates next to me in discussion or in break time. If my problems are still unsolved, I may ask the teacher when we have break or outside class. (F4)

It is not necessary to ask teachers every question, we can ask our friends. I only asked teachers when I have a really big difficulty. (M3)

Again, Vietnamese cultural values and cultures of learning which discourage public challenges to authority figures may have encouraged this reluctance and motivated students to ask questions after hours as a face-saving measure for the teacher (Jones, 1995; Littlewood, 2001; Littrell, 2005). Paradoxically, of course, questions during break time when Australian teachers are no longer responsible for the class may in fact be more 'bothersome' – especially if they are paid casually by the hour!

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

While language proficiency issues are clearly a major contributor to the reticence of Vietnamese students to speak in tertiary classes, these findings suggest that there are multiple complex motivations that go beyond the simple discourse of deficit that is often the focus of media comment on international students (Birrell, 2006; Devos, 2003; Trounson, 2011). It is not only what they *can't* do in English that holds them back from more active spoken participation, but also a range of cultural influences which discourage volubility, student initiations in class and public challenges to seniors, and

which value spoken contributions as testaments of ability and achievement rather than as tools of learning. Exposure to a learning culture in which a thousand flowers bloom seemed to both excite and concern the participants in this study. On the one hand, they were excited by the dynamic and interactive learning environments they encountered and could see the benefits that flow from a lively class, on the other, they were disdainful of the quality of the contributions made by some of their peers, which they sometimes regarded as unnecessary distractions.

There are valuable implications here for both international students and the staff who teach them. Despite their positive attitudes to increased student contributions in class, in their practical efforts to participate, the participants were clearly influenced by the values they brought with them from their previous cultures of learning. Since these are acquired at an early age, like most cultural values, they appear obvious and naturally right rather than culturally relative, and international students may not be fully aware of the cultures of learning they bring with them or how they impact their classroom participation. Moreover, even once aware, they may still find it difficult to change their behaviour. They may also resist these changes (Nakane, 2002).

Despite a flurry of concern over international student support, institutions have generally paid more attention to language support and welfare services than they have to the academic and cultural adjustments that are necessary if students from very different cultural backgrounds are to maximise their learning opportunities in Australia. As one participant told us, her pre-departure course focused only on reading and writing with very little attention to speaking skills and none to the learning culture she might expect to find or how to participate in it. Yet the skills to interact both inside and outside of the classroom are a crucial part of their Australian experience and, therefore, of Australia's investment in that experience (Yates and Wahid, in press). Given the major role played by international education in the Australian economy, the product we market to Vietnam and our other Asian neighbours, what Marginson, *et al* (2010) refer to as "Brand Australia", needs to take on board the responsibility not only for maintaining and developing the language proficiency of international students, but also their understanding of how cultural issues impact on the classroom. Students should be prepared to contribute actively and effectively in their university classrooms.

The findings also highlight some legitimate concerns that the participants had with their classes, and these should not just be dismissed from our Western perspectives as a failure to adapt to new and better ways of teaching. It is not only the responsibility of the students to participate and engage in their own learning in class, it is also the responsibility of the teacher to make explicit the nature of the activity or discussion being conducted and to regulate it so that contributions are on-task and accessible. It is also the responsibility of universities to respond appropriately to their changing student cohorts by making adequate provision, not only for student support, but also for support to staff who may need to adjust and fine-tune their learning and teaching approaches in the classroom.

A sensitive and multi-level approach to dealing with the reticence of the Vietnamese students is, therefore, required. Since students will inevitably not only bring, but also retain, some attachment to the values and beliefs from other cultures of learning, a two-way adjustment involving accommodation in both learner expectations and teaching style is needed (Yates, 2003; Yates and Wahid, in press). Measures to assist international students to understand the differences between their prior cultures of learning and their current Western classrooms could include dedicated seminars or preparation programs in which disparities between the learning cultures are examined without prejudice. And, these should be conducted as early as possible, preferably pre-departure. Such cultural issues need to be tackled alongside those of language proficiency and addressed explicitly by both students and teachers if Vietnamese students are to gain the maximum benefit from their international education experience.

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